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### What's in a Name?

**Citation for published version:**

Bondi, L 2014, What's in a Name? Secrets, Haunting and Family Ties. in J Wyatt & TE Adams (eds), *On (Writing) Families: Autoethnographies of Presence and Absence, Love and Loss*. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam. <<https://www.sensepublishers.com/media/1941-on-writing-families.pdf>>

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

On (Writing) Families

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

© Bondi, L. (2014). What's in a name?: Secrets, haunting and family ties. In J. Wyatt, & T. E. Adams (Eds.), *On (Writing) Families*. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam.

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**What's in a name?**  
**Secrets, haunting and family ties**

***Liz Bondi***

"Daddy, what is your middle name?"

"I don't have one"

"Why daddy?"

"Because I don't have one."

"But why?"

"There isn't a reason, I just don't have a middle name."

I was no more than nine years old when this conversation happened and I still cannot say whether my father was telling me the truth or his truth or something else.

My parents had given me and each of my siblings a middle name as well as a first name. Although none of us used our middle names routinely, I grew up very sure that mine belonged to me and when I was asked for my full name, I always included it. I remember too how my mother had a middle name and that she used her middle initial when she wrote her signature. The odd one out in my family was my father who, as I recall, always declared that he had no middle name. But a few months after my ninth birthday any reference to his middle name or its absence was suddenly brought to a halt.

It was the autumn, around the time of my older brother's thirteenth birthday. A parcel arrived addressed to him. It was an unexpected birthday gift from a relative I'd never heard of and whose identity I still do not know. The gift was a book that listed members of my paternal grandmother's family. This version of the book must have been produced soon after my birth because I was included in it along with my two older siblings (first name, middle name, family name for each of us) but my two younger siblings were not listed. I soon came to understand that the gift was probably intended to mark what would have been my brother's *bar mitzvah* had my family observed the custom. It was no secret that my father was Jewish by birth and that my mother was not. Both were avowedly non-religious and brought us up accordingly.

As my memory composes the story, after beginning to explore the book, my older brother was very excited to make a discovery, which he swiftly shared with me and our other siblings (then aged between 5 and 15). The discovery contradicted my father's story about having no middle name: in this book, his first name and his family name appeared just as we already knew them, but sandwiched between, where a middle name should be, was another name, of which we had been ignorant.

My siblings and I have different memories of these events, and the variance between them illustrates the fragility and mutability of memory (Loftus 1996). Shortly before writing this essay, inspired in part by Irene Kacandes' (2009) account of how she began to explore her own and her siblings' memories of learning about their father's boyhood experiences of war, I spoke to each of my siblings on the telephone. Individually I asked if they remembered a story about my father's middle name. My older brother, so central to my account, remembered nothing. He didn't contest the story I told but my telling didn't trigger his own memories. My younger sister, only five at the time, also had no memory of these events. My younger brother remembered the name but thought it was something we children had made up. I assured him that it wasn't made up and that the book existed. I knew this not because I had the book in my possession but because I was sure that my older sister – the eldest sibling – did. I spoke to her last and her memory of the events I have described thus far is broadly similar to mine, although she recalls my older brother having no interest in the book and that it was she who discovered the previously unknown name. Her account may explain why my older brother did not remember the book or the discovery of the name. If her memory is historically more accurate than mine, my version illustrates something of the compositional work that goes into the construction of memory in which my sense of the link to my brother reshaped how I held the story in my mind (Spence 1982). My memory and my older sister's memory also differ regarding what happened next.

I do not remember how my father became aware of the discovery one or other of my older siblings had made. Perhaps he witnessed excitement among us and asked us what it was about. Perhaps we went to him to tell him we had discovered that he did after all have a middle name. But however it unfolded, his response tied me into something that I felt to be a secret. I do not recall a clear scene but I came to believe

and “remember” that my father insisted to us that he hated the middle name he had been given, which was why he had denied its existence. Most importantly in my memory, we were sworn to secrecy about it with the utmost seriousness: he told us that we absolutely must remain silent about it henceforth and must not utter the name anywhere or anytime. My father was not in any sense dictatorial and he was certainly not a man easily moved to issue threats. But I knew that I had been given an instruction to keep his middle name secret and that this instruction was uncharacteristically forceful. I had no choice but to treat it seriously. To my nine-year-old self, the message was very clear: if I wasn’t capable of forgetting the existence of this middle name (which I might speculate two of my siblings succeeded in doing), I must be sure never to utter it. Even now, some 50 years later, and even though I know that the name “escaped” my father’s efforts to keep it hidden and can be found on the internet by moderately determined searchers without the book in question, I still feel the weight of that obligation. I do not recall any subsequent conversations with my father (who died in 2005) about the matter.

I am sure that I did have subsequent conversations about the name with my older sister although not for many years prior to our recent telephone conversation. She did not recall the weighty burden of being sworn to secrecy. Instead she thought that my father had responded by declaring that he knew nothing about the name in question. Her account is entirely plausible. The name that appears in the book between my father’s first name and family name is a traditional Hebrew name. It was probably the name by which he would have been called up to the Torah (marking his formal entry into his religious community in his own right) had he been observant. His first name, by which he was always known, is Germanic in origin and was a common name for boys in Austria, where he was born in 1919. It was also common for Jewish parents at this time to give their children a “gentile” as well as a Hebrew name. His parents were not observant Jews and of his mother he wrote that “from early on” she was “a strong rebel against the family orthodoxy and made it clear how much she disliked the narrowness, the self-satisfaction, the blindness of religion” (Bondi 1990, 3). It therefore seems entirely possible that the Hebrew name may not have been given to him by his parents. Perhaps someone in my paternal grandmother’s wider family was the source of his Hebrew name, and he never owned it in the way my siblings, my mother and I each owned our largely unused middle names.

Some light might be shed on the matter of my father's Hebrew name by examining legal papers including his birth certificate, his naturalisation papers, my parents' marriage certificate and Austrian-Jewish records from the period. However my purpose in this essay lies less with the "historical truth" of his name and more with the "narrative truth" of my experience of something secret by which I was bound (Spence 1982).

In whatever way my father responded to his children's discovery of a Hebrew name attaching to him, I came to feel an imperative to keep the name and its discovery secret. This imperative ties me to my family of origin in a very particular way. There is knowledge about his name that is shared within the family unit but from which others were to be excluded. As was clear, this knowledge also already existed elsewhere in the extended family of which we were part, but no members of this wider family lived anywhere near where we did. So my nine-year-old understanding of the secret I was to keep followed precisely the boundary of the family unit that consisted of my parents and my siblings. It reinforced the difference between who and what belonged to my family unit and who and what did not.

Families are, by definition, groups apart, which our modern legal and cultural systems consider to be entitled to at least a degree of privacy. So was my father asking me to keep a secret or to respect something private to our family? The difference between privacy and secrecy is a twentieth century construct now typically understood in terms of the impacts on others of what is held privately or secretly. Keeping a secret implies that something is being concealed that materially affects those excluded from its substance. If secrecy is not intrinsically deleterious, unfair or unkind, it is nevertheless construed to be the least bad option, which is the typical justification for both state and family secrets (Pulda 2012). By contrast, privacy protects individuals and families from unwarranted intrusion, and is positively valorised. Privacy enables openness and transparency within its boundaries, benefitting not only those within but also the wider communities to which those families belong.

Much of the damage associated with secrets within families arises from where and how the lines of exclusion are drawn, and therefore who is excluded from knowledge that matters (Pincus and Dare 1978). Bud Goodall (2005) tells of the toxic consequences of parental secrets from which he was excluded, but which he necessarily bumped up against in the ordinary daily life of his family or origin. After his father died, Goodall discovered layer upon layer of secrecy. The revelation that, for more than two decades, his father had been a spy was just the start of it. Secrets and lies had been his father's trade. His son (an only child) had grown up with a long series of cover stories and a "web of secrecy that finally defined and ensnared us all" (Goodall 2005, 499). Although Goodall (2005, 510) came to "appreciate the delicate balance in my father's decision to not tell me who he really was or what he really did", his account also illustrates how and why "secrecy as a familial strategy [...] is now viewed as destructive, a malign practice that erodes trust, especially between its members" (Cohen 2013, xii).

If my father had attempted to keep a secret from his children about his name, he was rumbled while we were still young. Perhaps, but I am not really sure, he had lied to me when I asked him about his middle name. But was that any more of a lie than the little "white" ones I was encouraged to tell when I was called upon to be gracious to someone I didn't like? In what sense did it make a difference to me or to anyone if he had concealed a name of which he knew? In no material sense was my trust abused. Once the Hebrew name was out, he did not try to cover it up with lies. Everyone within the family unit knew. There was, therefore, the kind of internal transparency that renders privacy "good". Who was affected, who could be hurt, by the request that we make no further mention of the name within or beyond the family? Perhaps this kind of secret strengthened the bonds of trust within our family rather than eroding them.

But what of my *feeling* of being bound to by a secret, which seemed to me to tie my family unit more strongly together? To keep a name secret seems so lacking in substance. Had my father denied his Jewishness, his desire for secrecy about his Hebrew name might have made more sense. But he did not. His Jewishness had always taken a non-religious, highly secularised form, both in the community in which he grew up and in the adult life he made for himself in the United Kingdom. As his

mother's attitude to religion indicates, he continued, rather than broke, a family tradition. Growing up in Vienna as Hitler rose to power in Germany and in the context of a pan-German movement, he was certainly subject to anti-Semitism. If he and others around him knew of his Hebrew name back then, I guess it is possible that it was used in anti-Semitic taunts. I might speculate that, for him, the name came to stand for the hatefulness of his exposure to anti-Semitism. When I put to one of my brothers the possibility that this might have motivated my father's desire for the name to be kept secret, his response was "no, that would surely have propelled him in exactly the opposite direction". I think that my brother is right: while I don't recall our father ever speaking explicitly about his childhood experience of anti-Semitism, his lifelong commitment to racial equality, enacted in numerous ways during my childhood, was eloquent evidence of his refusal to collude with such prejudice.

As I mull it over, it makes less and less sense to view my father's name as itself a source of shame to be kept secret. The feeling of a secret, one that I can't get rid of, doesn't seem to make sense if it was really about his Hebrew name. Perhaps my feeling of something secret adhering to my father's Hebrew name might be better understood as a sign of the presence of something connected in my mind to my father, but which could not be named, that is something unspeakable, something unthinkable. In this framing I hint towards what French psychoanalyst Nicolas Abraham (1975/1994, 173) has called the phantom, by which he means "a formation of the unconscious that [...] passes – in a way yet to be determined – from the parent's unconscious to the child's". Lodged inside the child it "stages the verbal stirrings of a secret buried alive in the [parent's] unconscious" (ibid, 173). In Abraham's account, which owes much to folklore, "what haunts are not the dead but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others" (ibid, 171). Perhaps I came to be haunted by "a secret buried alive" within my father's unconscious of which he was wholly unaware (ibid, 173). Maybe this phantom came to him from his own parents, maybe from within his own life, but something shameful, unspeakable, traumatic.

The idea of unconscious transmission from one generation to the next is central to psychoanalytic thinking: our earliest relationships shape our identities and the past is always alive in the present. The Scottish psychoanalyst W.R.D. Fairbairn (1952) reformulated Freud's thinking on the forces that shape the emerging infant psyche,

and suggested that our complex sense of ourselves is forged through the inevitable traumas of infant helplessness and dependency on fallible, imperfect parents. Reflecting on Freud's preoccupation with Jewish identity in writings from the last decade of his life, Stephen Frosh (2012, 120) asks if "we might have to see all identity construction as a mode of traumatic possession". He continues "[h]aunting is then the *norm*, not the pathological exception" (ibid, 120, emphasis in the original). On this account our identities are constituted by the very gaps and secrets that haunt us.

My sense of being bound by a family secret tells a narrative truth that does not align easily with an historical truth. When I explore my memories and those of which my siblings speak, attempting to find or to forge some narrative coherence, my father's apparent secrecy about his Hebrew name makes less and less sense. And yet the feeling of secrecy persists and somehow seems woven in to my relationship with my father when he was alive and since he died. It tells me something about who I am, keeping alive in me my sense of belonging to my family of origin not just in name but in the fabric of who I am. It seems integral to my identity, not as a pathological inheritance but in the most ordinary sense of a family tie.

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### **Acknowledgment**

My thanks to my siblings whose conversations with me made this essay possible and whose generous responses to an earlier draft helped to shape it. My thanks also to Judith Fewell, Phillip Jurczyk, Tony Adams and Jonathan Wyatt for feedback on that earlier draft.